

FDA proposes testing animal feed antibiotics

James Ciment, *New York*

The problem of antibiotic-resistant bacterial strains in the American food supply has once again come under scrutiny from the Food and Drug Administration. In the past few weeks, the agency has proposed a plan to test and report on the quantity and human health implications of antibiotics routinely added to animal feed.

Opponents of feed antibiotics say that their use increases the likelihood of the development of pathogens resistant to antibiotics. In early March, a coalition of 41 health and consumer groups requested that the FDA ban the routine use of antibiotics in feed if those same drugs were used for humans. A similar ban has been in effect in the European Union since last

year, imposed in the wake of the outbreak of "mad cow" disease in Britain.

Both the request for the ban and the FDA proposal come in the wake of an article published last year in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, which noted the emergence of a superstrain of food borne salmonella resistant to most drug treatments (1998; 338).

Virtually unknown a decade ago, this multidrug resistance threatens the recovery of millions of people struck by the disease annually. It is estimated that farmers mix up to 7.3m kg of antibiotics into the feed and water of chickens, pigs, and cattle annually, accounting for nearly one third of all antibiotics used in the country.

American trade union aims to recruit more doctors

Fred Charatan, *Florida*

Service Employees International Union, the largest healthcare union in the United States, has pledged \$1 million in its drive to recruit salaried doctors, about half of the 600,000 practicing doctors in the United States. About 35,000 doctors (6%) are already unionized.

The union plans to focus on the states of California, Florida, and Washington, as well as the District of Columbia, where doctors' unions are relatively strong. Doctors began to join unions in the 1970s, motivated by a revolution in health care.

The rush to join unions came because "American health care is in a state of hyperturbulence characterized by accumulated waves of change in payment systems, delivery systems, technology, professional relationships, and societal expectations," according to Professor Grace Budrys, the author of *When Doctors Join Unions*, (Cornell University Press, 1997, p.2).

"I can see the time coming when we're not simply independent business owners...but just workers," said Dr Lawrence

Koning, an obstetrician and gynecologist who is a member of the Union of American Physicians and Dentists in Oakland, California.

"Doctors are being fired, they're being cut back, they're being told what to do or how much to make...We have no power."

The American Medical Association (AMA), while strongly in favor of doctors engaging in collective bargaining with employers such as health maintenance organizations and managed care companies is against doctors joining unions. The AMA sees a conflict of interest between a doctor's professional identity and trade unions' use of strikes as the ultimate weapon.

Doctors belonging to a union would be expected not to cross picket lines, for example, if other union members such as nurses went on strike. This would result in a clear ethical dilemma for doctors.

Federal law also bars doctors from joining unions because they are viewed primarily as independent contractors

News in brief

Physicians worry about reporting domestic violence cases to police

The majority of California physicians worry that patient confidentiality could be destroyed by mandatory reporting of domestic violence to police, says a study in the *American Journal of Public Health* last month. The study, from UCSF, randomly surveyed 508 Californian physicians, from emergency medicine, family medicine, internal medicine and obstetrics/gynecology. Nearly 60% said they might not comply with the law if a patient objected. Most also believed that reporting could lead to worse domestic violence. California, along with New Mexico, Colorado, Kentucky, New Hampshire and Rhode Island, has specific laws requiring physicians to contact police with suspicion of partner violence. "The findings support the concern that this law violates basic tenets of medical ethics and may create barriers to health care for victims," warns study director Michael Rodriguez, assistant professor of family and community medicine at UCSF.

Routine vaccination against Hepatitis A recommended by CDC

Routine vaccination against Hepatitis A for some US children has been recommended by the Centers for Disease Control. In 14 states where rates of infection are higher than 20 per 100,000 persons, the CDC advises that vaccination, which costs about \$50 a child, is cost effective. About 60 000 children under the age of 15 years get the disease each year. So far, New Mexico has responded to the CDC saying that it will continue its policy of vaccinating in "hot spots" only.

Futile care policies should be backed by fair process says AMA *see also p.287*

When patients or their loved ones disagree with physicians over how much further care the patient should be given, the health care institution should have processes in place to resolve disputes. The AMA's Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs recommends prior discussion between patients, relatives, and physicians over what care would be considered futile and joint decision making using outcome data. In nonresolvable cases, the ethics committee should get involved. If agreement still cannot be reached, alternative care within the institution, or in another hospital, should be arranged. If this is not possible, the futile treatment should stop, says the Council.

in private practice. Under antitrust laws, doctors cannot join together to set terms of remuneration.

"The balance of power in the marketplace has tilted so far toward insurers and their shareholders and away from the inter-

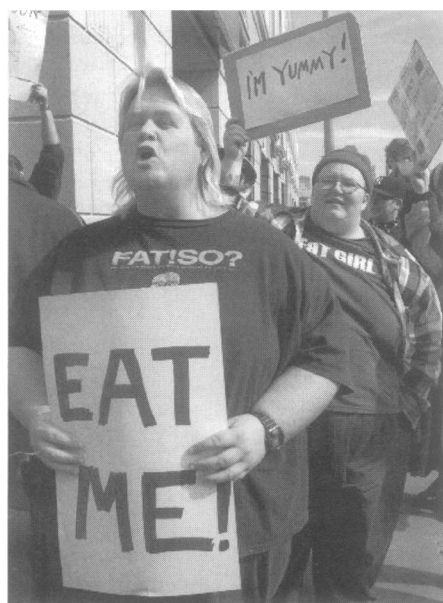
ests of our patients, that it has placed our patients and their physicians in a very dangerous position," said Dr Randolph Smoak, the chairman of the AMA board of trustees.

The AMA supports a bill, the Health Care Coalition Act, to be introduced in

Congress by California representative Tom Campbell, which would grant collective bargaining rights to healthcare professionals negotiating terms of employment with health maintenance organizations.

Fat people offended by West Coast gym advertisements

Scott Gottlieb, *New York*



Ben Margot/Associated Press.

A new billboard for a 24-hour fitness center in San Francisco that depicts aliens and reads, "When they come, they'll eat the fat ones first," is creating a stir over what is acceptable advertising, and what sensitivity is owed to those who are fat.

The month-old billboard has infuriated a group of self-described fat activists, who came out recently to protest the ad and the antifat ethos they say is prevalent in many gyms.

"I find the ad very offensive," said Francis White, director of the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance. "The billboard never would have seen the light of day if any other group in this society was targeted. Fat people are the last safe prejudice," she said.

People of weight responded with equally humorous protests. They conducted an aerobics class in front of the health-club chain's outlets and waved signs reading "Eat Me," "I'm Yummy," and "Bite My Fat Alien Butt."

much, because gyms are pretty intimidating places," Wann said.

Despite the protests from fat activists, the health club said it has no plans to change its advertisement.

"As we know, obesity is one of the leading causes of health care costs in our society. It's no laughing matter at all," said Craig Pepin-Donat, northwest division president of 24 Hour Fitness, the chain of 284 gyms based in San Diego County that ran the ad. The company said there was no intention to offend anyone with its current ad.

"This country is the fattest nation in the world today," said Mark Mastrov, chief executive officer of 24 Hour Fitness. "The reality is that most people in this country are overweight and they need to get into an exercise program," he said.

"I think fat people should lighten up," said Jerry Della Femina, a New York

"Despite the protests from fat activists, the health club said it has no plans to change its advertisements."

"It's a serious issue," said Marilyn Wann, author of the book *Fat? So*, who organized the protests of the billboard advertisement. "I encourage people of all sizes to exercise. But I think this ad isn't helping much, and the whole fitness industry isn't really helping

advertising executive who describes himself as "fat." "There is nothing wrong with that billboard, but I like the fact that people are now marching. It is good exercise. There's nothing to the poster. It's funny," he said.